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Making a fashion statement: Word-of-mouth marketing on Instagram

by

Kasey Opfer

A thesis submitted to the graduate faculty

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF SCIENCE

Major: Journalism and Mass Communication

Program of Study Committee:

Jan Boyles, Major Professor

Novotny Lawrence

Telin Chung

The student author, whose presentation of the scholarship herein was approved by the program of study committee, is solely responsible for the content of this thesis. The Graduate College will ensure this thesis is globally accessible and will not permit alterations after a degree is conferred.

Iowa State University

Ames, Iowa

2019

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DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my family. Each and every one of you played such an important role in supporting me as I completed this research. Without your unwavering love and support, I would have never been able to achieve what I have in not only the work toward completing my master's degree, but also my bachelor's degree and my collegiate athletic career. Each and every one of you continuously push me to be the best version of myself, regardless of the challenges at hand.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank my committee chair, Dr. Jan Lauren Boyles, and my committee members, Dr. Novotny Lawrence and Dr. Telin Chung, for their guidance and support throughout the course of this research. You three have been incredible as committee members, as well as professors and mentors. You have all taught me invaluable lessons about academics, leadership, and perseverance that I will carry with me far beyond my time at Iowa State University.

In addition, I would also like to thank my friends, fellow students, the department faculty and staff for making my time at Iowa State University a wonderful experience. The Greenlee School of Journalism and Communication is especially remarkable. I have had nothing but wonderful memories to accompany two degrees from one of the most reputable journalism schools in the country.

I want to also offer my appreciation to those who were willing to participate in my interviewing process, without whom, this thesis would not have been possible.

ABSTRACT

For the fashion industry, Instagram has emerged as a primary social media platform for clothing brands, who are quickly learning how to use Instagram to share visual content in hopes of engaging consumers. This study features 13 in-depth interviews with store owners and social media professionals from local brands across the Upper Midwest. This study advances that “brand authenticity” is the most important aspect of Instagram marketing to the local fashion industry.

CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

The fashion industry has quickly adapted to recent technological innovations. With the mass adoption of social media, brands have had to rapidly shift their marketing strategies from print, television and online, to focusing on social media. As a result, they have been introduced to e-commerce, fast-fashion and product personalization – all new ideas in the industry resulting from social media use. Today, consumers play a much larger role in brands' social media activity, and where they are now placed central to the fashion system. In an effort to control what consumers are saying about a brand online, this project explores the word of mouth marketing approach, and how it may be applicable to social media use in the fashion industry.

To date, previous research has discussed how consumers approach eWOM on social media platforms. There has been little-to-no research regarding eWOM marketing from the store's point-of-view. In the few studies that do look at eWOM from the store's point-of-view, the information is primarily quantitative. This study fills the gap where qualitative research is needed regarding the opportunity that stores have to use social media, particularly Instagram, as a marketing tool. In doing this study, the researcher conducted in-depth interviews with social media coordinators from Upper Midwestern stores/boutiques. These small business owners typically face limitations in operations, making the participants in this research particularly unique. The researcher gained a better understanding of how Instagram marketing practices parallel and differ based on the type of store and where it is located. This study also highlights a framework of Instagram marketing practices in the Midwest, providing professionals in the fashion industry the opportunity to compare their practices to those of competitors, as well as see how marketing differs based on location, type of store, experience with social media use or type of audience.

CHAPTER 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Industry Evolution and Fashion Systems

Today's fashion industry has developed and adapted to the constant advancements in technology, specifically relating to media. The McKinsey State of Fashion Survey suggested that the current state of the fashion industry can best be described in three words: "changing, digital and fast" (Amed et al., 2019). With fashion industry leaders adopting a number of new trends, the purchasing power of consumers dominates how the fashion industry evolves (Amed et al., 2018). This section discusses how the fashion industry has changed since the evolution of e-commerce, looking specifically at its slow transition into fast-fashion and product personalization. It will also explore consumer behavior, brand and consumer co-creation, the advancement of print and digital media and how social media, particularly Instagram, is used in the fashion industry.

Starting in the 1990s, the development of e-commerce shifted the way the fashion industry performs (Chaffey, 2009). The introduction of e-commerce changed the way consumers shop for clothing (Diamond and Diamond, 2013). Consumers are more careful about where they spend their money. Therefore, they turned to the more affordable brands that were easily accessible online (Diamond and Diamond, 2013). As a result, a separation started to occur, in which most Americans sought affordable fashion, while a small percentage were still purchasing from luxury brands (Diamond and Diamond, 2013). In 2017-2018, 25 percent of global fashion sales happened online (Meena, 2018). By 2022, this number is expected to increase to 36 percent (Meena, 2018). This rise in e-commerce challenged the productivity of retail clothing stores, which is one of the reasons why there were 10,000 US clothing retail stores that closed permanently in the US in 2018 alone (Clark, 2017).

In the late 2010s, brands were transitioning into “Fast-Fashion.” This is a business model made up of three main elements: “(i) quick response; (ii) frequent assortment changes; and (iii) fashionable designs at affordable prices” (Caro and Martínez-de-Albéniz, 2018, p. 7). In other words, fast-fashion retailers viewed the newest fashion trends featured by luxury brands, and quickly recreated these designs using cheaper materials and offering them at a much lower price (Caro and Martínez-de-Albéniz 2018). These recreated designs could be seen in-stores within three to five weeks, giving consumers quick access to these luxury designs at an affordable price point (Barnes and Lea-Greenwood, 2006; Bhardwaj and Fairhurst, 2010). These so-called “knock-off” designs have an extremely short shelf-life, lasting only weeks before a new design is released (Barnes and Lea-Greenwood, 2006; Bhardwaj and Fairhurst, 2010). Some brands that are considered fast-fashion retailers include: H&M, Zara, Gap, Uniqlo, Topshop, Forever 21, Mango, Wet Seal, Benetton, New Look, Esprit, C&A, American Apparel, Urban Outfitters, Peacocks, Charlotte Russe and Armani Exchange (Caro and Martínez-de-Albéniz, 2018). For instance, Roll (2018) suggested that Zara creates “freshly baked clothes” that die out after a couple of months, and then the cycle repeats. The turnover rate of clothing is so short, that Americans send roughly 10.5 million tons of clothing to landfills annually (Josephson, 2018).

With this rapid rotation of new designs, consumers are looking to purchase these items quicker than ever (D’Souza, 2018). Therefore, luxury brands such as Burberry and Rebecca Minkoff are pressured to make their clothing more accessible for purchase right away before brands like Zara recreate their designs (D’Souza, 2018). These luxury brands know that if they do not make their designs readily available for purchase, consumers will go to fast-fashion retailers to buy these designs instead (D’Souza, 2018). In order to keep up with this cycle, Rebecca Minkoff switched her business model to “see now/buy now,” and sold four times the

number of items she had anticipated on selling from the spring collection. (D'Souza, 2018). In doing this, she gave consumers direct access to her products, and she assured that her designs would be launched by her own company first, prior to fast-fashion retailers making money off of her designs (D'Souza, 2018).

Personalization of products has also been extremely attractive and important to consumers (Steel, 2018). Experts suggested this move may end the concept of fashion seasons, as design schedules and manufacturing cycles will be disrupted by consumer preference and varying climates globally (Steel, 2018). More than 70 percent of consumers expect companies to take into account their expectations, wants and needs when making a purchase (McGinnis, 2016). In particular, millennials top the charts with consumers that expect personalized offers, in-store and online experiences and product recommendations (McGinnis, 2016). For these reasons, brands are advised to be “nimble, think digital-first, and achieve ever-faster speed to market” (Amed et al., 2019). To accomplish this task, brands are relying the most on real-time data, as well as rapid responsiveness and flexibility to best fill consumer's needs (Bhardwaj and Fairhurst, 2010; Jackson, 2001).

The way in which a brand has shifted to e-commerce, adopting fast-fashion and product personalization, stems from the fashion system. A fashion system is the process in which an idea such as a clothing design is physically created, and then sold in in-store and online retail stores (Barthes, 2010). In particular, fashion systems signify how important the relationship between producers and consumers is to the developments in buying products (Harvey, 1989). Quataert (2000) suggested that the stability of the production and consumption relationship depends on the brand's esthetic, social, cultural and economic practices. Overall, Quataert (2000) believed

that fashion is not easily understandable unless these factors are taken into consideration because of how they alter the way clothing is purchased over time.

In terms of social norms, Craik (2003) discusses fashion systems as part of an ever-changing “fashion grammar” that conforms to Western society. Fashion grammar is also known as the unsaid “rules” (p. 5) of dress that society creates (Craik, 2003). Within the fashion system, these codes are created and ruled by high-end brands, in which the more affordable brands typically follow as well (Craik, 2003). Brands in the fashion industry have felt pressured to keep up with the system’s “fashion grammar” (Craik, 2003).

Despite keeping up with fashion grammar, the fashion industry also has to keep up with the media by altering how and where products are sold in the fashion system. For fashion magazines and newspapers, this meant selecting “fashion teams” that dealt with brands, photoshoots and designers to create the ideal up-to-date content for both the publication and the brand in order to stay relevant (Moeran, 2006). Along with the creation of media content internally, external media content was also key for keeping up with digital innovations. For brands on social media, this means regularly updating content, and staying relevant by using social media influencers (Freberg et al., 2011). A social media influencer is a “third-party endorser” (p. 90) who uses social media platforms to influence how the public thinks or feels about a brand (Freberg, et al., 2011). These influencers are typically compensated and are directed by the brand as to what they should be expressing to consumers (Freberg et al., 2011).

Aside from the internal challenges, the fashion industry is facing the external pressures from consumers’ buying power, which is driving the industry. Understanding the needs of consumers can help with marketing strategies being more competitive in the fashion industry (Bhardwaj and Fairhurst, 2010). Because most consumers put great value in materialism, the

fashion industry is extremely important to them (Benson, 2004). Materialism is the idea that consumers treat possessions as an extension of themselves; hence it is why they place so much value on what they own (Belk, 1988; Benson, 2004). Because the consumer's self-identity is constantly evolving, the demand for products in the fashion industry evolve, too (Benson, 2004). With this pressure from consumers, the faster a fashion brand can directly connect with a consumer, the better (Cooksley, 2016). After looking at how the fashion industry has changed over time and how fashion systems adapted to fast-fashion and product personalization, it is also important to discuss how changes in media and consumer demand have influenced the industry.

Fashion Media History and Consumer Demand

The marketing of fashion content targeted toward women can be traced to the rise of lifestyle magazines and newspapers. Magazines aimed at women started to develop in the 1800s (Jolliffe, 1994). The first accredited fashion publication was *Graham's Magazine*, which was popular from 1826 until 1857 (Packard, 1983). It was followed by *Godey's Lady Book*, which was recognized as the most popular fashion magazine of the nineteenth century until its last issue in 1898 (Packard, 1983). The magazines developed throughout the nineteenth century were targeting primarily women, therefore, they featured instructions for sewing, knitting and crocheting garments, as well as showing the latest trends in women's fashion (Packard, 1983). To come up with content ideas, the magazines would send merchandisers to high-profile social events in the fashion-forward cities at the time including: New York, Philadelphia and Boston (Packard, 1983). This gave them the chance to see what the newest trends would be among well-known celebrities, similar to what magazines still do today (Wolbers, 2009). They also collaborated with stores and brands to influence what items will be sold, and when they will be sold, giving consumers validity that the magazine keeps up with the hottest fashion trends (Packard, 1983).

In the late 1800s, some of today's most popular magazines were developed including *Harper's Bazaar* in 1867, and *Vogue* in 1892 (Packard, 1983). At the time, these magazines used the garments worn at social events as indicators of high fashion (Packard, 1983). However, *Harper's Bazaar* was the first publication to feature solely fashion (Wolbers, 2009). Early on, *Harper's Bazaar* magazine's fashion features were one-page color prints with women dressed in outfits in a basic setting, either indoors or outdoors (Roskell, 1970; Hughes, 2008). However, toward the end of the nineteenth century, a few trends developed that ultimately dictated the emergence of solely fashion-focused magazines, such as *Harper's Bazaar* (Wolbers, 2009). These trends include the sale of paper clothing patterns in magazines first occurring in *Vogue* in the mid-1890's, ready-to-wear clothing production expanding for higher accessibility and cheaper prices, emergence of advertising after the Civil War, and reports from fashion writers in Paris and New York that were indicators of the newest trends these magazines were following (Wolbers, 2009).

With the emergence of new magazines, a market developed for fashion, beauty and women's lifestyle content such as relationship advice, makeup tips, what not-to-wear, and so on (Keeble, 2005). Eventually, this content became normative for women in which they began to reflect on their own beauty, fashion and lifestyle, comparing themselves to the content in these publications through the 1930s and 1940s (Keeble, 2005). The development of women's lifestyle magazines continued through the 1960s, when magazines such as *Cosmopolitan* and *Glamour* both led the industry (Keeble, 2005). This trend in lifestyle content can also be seen throughout newspapers -- starting in the 20th century, when cosmetic goods were being advertised in newspaper columns, and continued through the 1950s and 1960s (Breward, 2003).

The late 1990s was the start of a downhill slope for print magazines and newspapers (Ghersetti, 2014). During this time, magazine editors realized they needed to make a change in order to maintain steady revenue in the wake of digital media (Bereznak, 2018). These print media sources began to lose readership, and could not compete with the free, easy access content posted online (Ghersetti, 2014). Because of this loss of circulation in print media, overall advertising revenue in these outlets began to decrease, while advertising on digital media sources started to take over (Barthelemy et al., 2011). With the large emergence of social media in the 2000s, brand marketing shifted its emphasis from magazine and newspaper to almost fully digital (Mohr, 2013). Based on the World Press Trends Report (2012), the US digital advertising market revenue increased from \$42 billion to \$76 billion just from 2007 to 2012. With the arrival of new devices for online access such as the iPad, the World Press Trend Report (2012) also discovered that six in 10 tablet users agreed their digital device replaces the information they once obtained from magazines and newspapers. This led brands to take on a digital approach to their once print-only marketing strategies (Mohr, 2013).

Because brands are using online platforms, consumers are more inclined to get in touch with fashion brands online (Mohr, 2013). Social media allows companies to disperse skills and information to consumers, while collecting information from consumers that are valuable for generating revenue (Si, 2015). The ability to share content using “text, audios, videos, images and communities” is what separates social media from other marketing tools (Cukul, 2015, p. 117). At first, fashion brands believed that social media use would potentially weaken this relationship (Mohr, 2013). Instead, using social media has provided a direct, two-way form of communication, increasing the size of the audience so the consumer can interact directly with the content the brands post (Mohr, 2013). The key is for brands to target the emotions of consumers

by forming a quality relationship that makes the consumer want to be involved with the brand (Clark and Melancon, 2013; Turr et al., 2013; Whiting and Deshpande, 2014; Cukul, 2015). This relationship motivates consumers to be more attracted to the brand and speak more positively about the brand publicly (Kemp, Smith, and Turri, 2013). User participation, in fact, was one of the main motivators for firms to begin using social media (Tiago and Verissimo, 2014).

Many brands have recognized the value social media has in marketing strategies. A recent survey reported that 56 percent of managers said competition is the biggest reason for their company's adoption of social media for marketing efforts (Tiago and Verissimo, 2014). Based on a report of 7,000 shoppers, three out of every four purchases were decided based on what consumers see, hear and do online (Hope, 2016). Therefore, if a brand does not have a social media presence, it is losing out on an incredible amount of influence on consumers to buy products online (Hope, 2016). The rise in marketing on social media has forced brands in the fashion industry to take a new approach for making and distributing content (Tsai & Men, 2013; Godey et al., 2016). Companies are increasingly opening up to customers and stakeholders about the company's values, which -- in turn -- generates conversation online (Evans, 2010).

Research suggests that consumers play such a big role in the online fashion industry that they co-create current fashion trends online (Wolny and Mueller, 2013). Co-creation is the idea that firms and consumers are in a give-and-take relationship of extracting value from one another, in which products are created that benefit both sides of the relationship (Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2004). Aside from the fashion industry, consumers also play a co-creation role in the media. Also known as participatory media, citizen media refers to the idea that consumers participate in the media through sharing photos and videos, posting blogs and liking or

commenting on others' posts (Goode, 2009). Along with sharing content, citizens can also actively post their own original content (Goode, 2009).

In terms of fashion, the rise of co-creation means the industry's trends are no longer dictated solely by designers and experts (Cooksley, 2016). An example of co-creation in the fashion industry is how Zara is successful in production (Roll, 2018). They follow developing trends from consumers very closely and are quick to produce these trends based on what they observe from consumers online (Roll, 2018). Another example is Burberry's online campaign called "Burberry Bespoke" in which consumers could design their own garments and order those garments online (Howarth, 2015). This co-creation strategy increased Burberry's social media following, as well as gave the brand a better idea of what consumers are interested in seeing from its clothing lines (Howarth, 2015).

Aside from the brand's image online, models and influencers representing a brand use social media to interact with fans. A social media influencer uses social media platforms to influence public attitudes about a brand (Freberg et al., 2011). Also known as a human brand, social media influencers are used as the main subject when brands market for a product or idea, so that consumers immediately associate that influencer with the product (Ang et al., 2016). They are encouraged to upload photos, videos and stream live feed from events (Park et al., 2016).

Fashion brands generate conversations on Instagram through influencer marketing. Influencer marketing is "identifying, engaging and supporting individuals who create conversations with a brand's customers" (Glucksman, 2017, p. 77). Marketing teams also use social media to promote events. For example, Burberry posted photos leading up to a runway event, as well as behind-the-scenes photos that included products and fashion models (Cukul,

2015). Their goal was to “create an interactive experience” (p. 119) for anyone who couldn’t make it to the show (Bullas, 2012; Cukul, 2015).

Across the multitude of social media platforms available on which social influencers operate, Instagram is of particular value to the fashion industry (Goodman, 2018). Instagram is a video and photo sharing mobile application where the user can edit photos, apply filters, use hashtags, tag other users, add locations, follow and be followed by an unrestricted amount of people (Hu, Manikonda and Kambhampati, 2014). While it has surpassed Twitter and Facebook in daily mobile users, Facebook eventually purchased the highly valued app for \$1 billion in 2012 (Salomon, 2013). Compared to other platforms, Instagram reaches a younger, more diverse audience, consisting of teens and those in their 20s (Salomon, 2013). With more than 800 million active Instagram users, it yields a tremendous opportunity for brands to increase their reach online (Goodman, 2018). Instagram’s growth was fueled by the growth in mobile. As more high-tech phones with better camera quality became popular, so did Instagram (Salomon, 2013).

Brands, social media influencers and consumers have all used Instagram as a platform to post their own style decisions, where they can influence trends in the fashion industry that actually dictate the decisions made by designers and other experts (Cooksley, 2016). Social media influencers may also project the brand or product on a personal Instagram account, where they use their own followers as another audience base (Ang et al., 2016). They are themselves used as a branding tool that can engage a larger audience and broaden a brand’s reach (Ang et al., 2016). Co-creation can also be initiated by the brand on social media. For example, Ramaswamy and Ozcan (2014) discuss Nike’s “PHOTOiD” campaign, in which it partnered with Instagram for users to choose their favorite photo, from which a color scheme would be used to design a custom pair of Nike Air Max (Ramaswamy and Ozcan, 2014). These Instagram

users then shared their shoe designs online, which gave Nike a better idea of what consumers are looking for in their products (Ramaswamy and Ozcan, 2014)

Because it is “changing, digital, and fast,” (Amed, 2019) fashion brands must discover how to keep up in an evolving industry. As a result, companies have adopted new trends like fast fashion, as well as handling the pressures of the consumers. Being able to align with the values of consumers by making personalized products and marketing of these products on social media will be key to staying ahead in the industry. This study explores how social media professionals in the fashion industry can apply these concepts to their own work, and how they can take their marketing strategies a step further in pleasing consumers. While most current research on social media refers to Twitter, Facebook and YouTube, a smaller amount focuses solely on Instagram. Because Instagram is more recent and strictly photo and video based, it is more difficult to study. This is because most of the research regarding social media research uses a textual analysis, rather than visual analysis (Hu et al., 2014).

Building from this existing literature, in this study, the researcher examined how brands in the fashion industry are using Instagram for marketing purposes. Specifically, the researcher discussed how professionals in the fashion industry are using Instagram to impact audience engagement with their digital content. The researcher particularly focused upon visual content on Instagram, as seen through the elements that social media coordinators use in posting photos and videos. To conduct this study, the researcher used in-depth interviewing, which provided support for understanding social media marketing practices, and how fashion brands attempted to control how consumers are engaging with their brand online (and subsequently, to control their relationships with their audiences).

CHAPTER 3. SOCIAL MEDIA MARKETING PRACTICES

Source Credibility

When discussing media messages transmitted via word of mouth it is important to discuss the source credibility from which these messages originate. Callison (2001) defines credibility as the “judgments made by a message recipient concerning the believability of a communicator (p. 220).” With online communication, source credibility is particularly difficult to identify due to the use of anonymous names and profiles, and the ease of posting and sharing information, despite knowledge of where it originated. Along with credibility, other aspects of word of mouth marketing, such as opinion leadership or influencer marketing, will be discussed, looking particularly at one-way and two-way flows of communication, different types of gatekeeping, and word of mouth marketing on social media.

Two of the most widely accepted components of source credibility are trustworthiness and competence (O’Keefe, 1990; Callison, 2001). Competence is the overall expertise of the source, while trustworthiness is the source’s integrity (Callison, 2001). Sources that are seen as trustworthy and competent are also likely seen as prestigious (Epega, 2008). Sources that have high prestige in regard to the message they are communicating, in turn, have higher agreement among the public (Epega, 2018).

In terms of social media, prestige can be difficult to clearly identify due to the different flows of communication. The two-step flow of communication occurs when a message is sent from a medium to opinion leaders or gatekeepers, which is then conveyed to the public (Katz, 1957). However, the more recent one-step flow of communication removes the need for a middleman, as the message can be conveyed directly to the audience with no steps in between (Bennett and Manheim, 2006). With this quick, one-step flow of communication from the source

directly to the consumers, gatekeeping from editors, advertisers, and journalists is not as present as it used to be (Westerman et al., 2014). Because of this decrease in gatekeeping with social media, consumers have been forced to make their own decisions regarding which source is credible, and which is not (Westerman et al., 2014). Rather than gatekeeping, Bruns (2005) coined the term “gate watching.” This term came from the idea that the mass amount of never-ending information accessible on social media, with no true consistency on quality of content. This means that social media users must constantly be monitoring the content they consume for accuracy and reliability (Bruns, 2005).

Social media source credibility can be an even bigger challenge for consumers seeking information from fashion brands online. Before gaining credibility, a brand must first have a good reputation (Herbig and Milewicz, 1993). Reputation represents how a company has performed in the past, and how this performance is perceived by buyers in relation to their personal experiences (Yoon and Nelson, 1970; Margulies, 1977; Rosenthal and Landau, 1979; Kreps and Wilson, 1980; Shapiro, 1982; Yoon et al., 1993) With a good reputation, consumers are likely to associate your brand with quality clothing items that live up to the consumers’ values (Herbig and Milewicz, 1993). They return to these brands for those particular products (Herbig and Milewicz, 1993). On the other hand, delivering inconsistent information, and giving mixed signals results in a lack of trust, decreased reputation and overall lack of credibility for the brand (Herbig and Milewicz, 1993). Reputation can be measured using a reputation system, which collects information from individuals online who give feedback to their experiences with a brand (Resnick et al., 2000). For example, product review sites, such as Yelp.com, Bizrate.com or Eopinions.com, collect feedback from buyers based on their experience with the company (Resnick et al., 2000). These sites then collect this information and add it to a running tally that

gives the company an overall rating based on customer feedback, usually based on a 5-star scale (Resnick et al., 2000). Because of consumers' ability to share their experiences online with ease, brands have been using outside sources that shape public opinion online, with the hopes to influence the way consumers talk about the brand.

Opinion Leadership

While gatekeeping is not seen to the same extent as it occurred prior to digital media, opinion leaders often act as the middle-ground between a buyer and a seller (Masullo, 2017). Information consumers focus on the thoughts and beliefs of opinion leaders, which -- in turn -- affects how they think and feel about the information that they receive (Katz and Lazarsfeld, 1955). Opinion leaders serve as those who steer the motivations and behaviors of others by affecting their general opinions and beliefs (Katz and Lazarsfeld, 1955). Katz and Lazarsfeld (1955) developed this two-way flow of communication, where a message is sent to the opinion leader, and then dispersed to the general audience from the opinion leader. The media also influences how institutions and agencies operate, impacting their practices and experiences (Rocamora, 2017).

Some ethical issues arise with source credibility and opinion leadership. Many of these opinion leaders (or influencers, when speaking in terms of social media) are compensated by a certain brand to leave a positive review or to promote its products to consumers in a favorable light (Carr and Hayes, 2014). This occurred with Lord & Taylor in 2015, when they paid 50 different fashion influencers up to \$4000 each to post a photo in the same dress at the same time without the opinion leaders disclosing they were compensated in the posts (Stewart, 2016). Companies reach out to certain opinion leaders to form a friendly relationship, in which the company trusts the opinion leader to leave good reviews on products and services in return for compensation (Jarvis, 2006; Carr and Hayes, 2014). While the Federal Trade Commission made

it illegal to review product or brand without disclosing compensation in 2009, only 15 percent of bloggers in the US comply with this law (Walden et al., 2013; Carr and Hayes, 2014). This presents issues with trustworthiness and overall credibility of bloggers on social media, and who influences what is being discussed via word of mouth online. That being said, brands use word of mouth marketing to attempt influencing what is said amongst consumers online. However, using word of mouth marketing can cause issues with authenticity. While it may be easy to influence what an audience is saying about the brand, keeping the content used for word-of-mouth marketing aligned with the internal values of the brand is particularly difficult.

Brand Authenticity

The idea of brand authenticity is a relatively new concept that has emerged since the evolution of social media as a marketing tool. Before the idea of brand authenticity was fully developed, there were a few different perspectives of the generalized definition of authenticity. Erikson (1975) believed authenticity was based solely on identity. However, this definition was derived without the consideration of the social media environment. Consumers and brands are now pressured to conform with social norms, which then influences overall consumer behavior (Schallen et al., 2014). Schallen et al. (2014) introduce the idea of authenticity with the consideration of this external pressure. These researchers suggest the idea of self-authenticity is when a person stays true to personal values in midst of external social pressures (Schallen et al., 2014). However, the introduction of social networking platforms has amplified this social pressure. Consumers now use social media as a source for comparison of their lives with others, causing a sense of pressure to set in to meet the standards of others online (Schallen et al., 2014).

This idea of external pressure from social media functions similarly in brands trying to maintain their authenticity online as it does with individuals. Schallen et al. (2014) suggests, “an authentic brand is clear about what it stands for. It is a brand which positions itself from the

inside out versus one that panders to the latest trend.” (p. 194). Brand authenticity is identified by combining attributes of brand identity and brand image (De Chernatony et al., 2011). Brand identity consists of the attributes that are targeted and recognizable to the internal stakeholders of the brand, such as employees and owners (Meffert et al., 2012). Meanwhile, the brand image is the opposite. The brand image incorporates this new idea of social pressure, essentially suggesting the judgements made about a certain brand from external stakeholders including employees, and those who follow or engage with the brand online fall as pressure for the brand to uphold a certain image (Meffert et al., 2012). Reflecting the same image to external stakeholders as is portrayed with internal stakeholders is key to remaining authentic online, despite how other brands are conforming (Schallen et al., 2014).

In discussing brand identity and brand image, brand authenticity occurs when these two concepts align (Schallen et al., 2014). This idea of brand authenticity is crucial to consider in today’s age of social media, as consumers’ need for credibility and trust in the brands they purchase from is steadily increasing (Burnett and Hutton, 2007). Schallen et al. (2014) suggest brand authenticity is made up of three key concepts: “consistency, continuity, and individuality of a brand” (p. 192). Originating from Kelley’s (1973) co-variation model, Schallen, Burmann, and Riley (2014) suggest “consistency” (p. 139) refers to how closely the current brand image reflects that of the past, “continuity” (p. 139) looks at how a brand has stuck to its core values over an extended time period, and “individuality” (p. 139) is the way in which a brand maintains their individual presence regardless of external factors. These three factors equally contribute to brand authenticity (Schallen et al., 2014). In achieving this brand authenticity, consumers will have higher trust in the brand (Schallen et al., 2014). Brand trust is the idea that brand will fulfill the expectations of its consumers, as promised (Chaudhuri and Holbrook, 2001).

Brand authenticity is unique as it takes into consideration the modern-day external factors, specifically today's social media climate, which influences how brands and consumers perceive what is real online. Going back to the literature regarding social media influencers and opinion leadership, it is common for individuals to be compensated for reviewing or posting about a certain brand (Holt, 2002). What is said about these brands or products is not always trustworthy to consumers (Holt, 2002). With this new idea of influencer marketing, the value brand of authenticity has steadily increased since consumers seek brands they can trust (Holt, 2002). In doing this, consumers may begin to engage in word of mouth regarding their experiences or perceptions of these certain brands.

Word of Mouth Marketing

Leveraging source credibility and brand authenticity, brands use social media content to impact what consumers are talking about online – a concept known as (electronic) word of mouth marketing (Libai et al., 2010). Silverman (2011) defines the approach as “the deliberate attempt to encourage and facilitate the transmission of the above third-party communication” (p. 52). By “third-party,” Silverman means those who do not have relation to the producer of the product or service. At first, the organic impression of word of mouth theory was strictly consumer-to-consumer (Kozinets et al., 2010). Word of mouth subsequently transformed into an opinion leader influencing multiple consumers at once (Kozinets et al., 2010). With the development of social media, these third-party consumers are now more connected and able to interact than ever (Silverman, 2011). Most recent word of mouth theoretical frameworks suggest that one ordinary consumer can share information with multiple consumers that can influence purchase behavior (Kozinets et al., 2010).

Word of mouth marketing is used to control the brand's image and reputation among consumers, emphasizing the customer-to-customer relationship (Libai et al., 2010). Silverman

(2011) describes how the relationship between marketers and consumers has changed over time. Word of mouth marketing is now “with” the customer, rather than “for” or “to” the consumer (Silverman, 2011, p. 17). Traditional marketing does not yield the same power and close proximity to consumers that word of mouth marketing does (Silverman, 2011). Day (1971) found that word of mouth marketing could produce nine times the number of positive consumer attitudes than traditional advertising techniques because consumers are more likely to listen to sources that they know on a personal level, rather than outside, unfamiliar sources. This is important because information regarding a brand’s performance is perceived as being truthful and unbiased if it comes from a source a consumer knows personally (Zeithaml et al., 1993).

Customer satisfaction is particularly important in the word of mouth marketing model. The more satisfied the customer is, the more likely the customer is to leave a positive review, which enhances the overall brand image and increases expectations from other consumers as they can determine what the service ought to be like (Zeithaml et al., 1993). Scholars suggest three main types of customer service that should be fulfilled to please the customer: “desired service, adequate service and predicted service” (Zeithaml et al., 1993, p. 1). Desired service refers to what customers think “can be and should be provided,” (p. 6) adequate service is the lowest standard of service deemed acceptable to a customer, and predicted service is what customers believe the company is going to provide (Zeithaml, Berry, Parasuraman, 1993).

Word of mouth marketing has become integral for businesses operating online because of the mass adoption of online shopping among consumers who make purchases based on what they know about the brand from word of mouth. As a result, business professionals are putting a larger emphasis on social media word of mouth marketing efforts. Because of the importance of what is being said among consumers, brands target social media influencers as an attempt to

control word of mouth communication (Meraz, 2009). This helps brands because these influencers have anywhere from thousands to millions of followers on social media, so the brand's overall exposure is increased thanks to the influencer's post (Meraz, 2009). A recent study found that 70 percent of American marketing professionals surveyed are planning to increase their budget for online word of mouth marketing (State of Word of Mouth, 2014). Of the sample, 82 percent will use word of mouth marketing with hopes to see a rise in awareness, and 64 percent agree word of mouth is more effective than traditional marketing strategies (State of Word of Mouth, 2014). With luxury brands in particular, social media has increased word of mouth marketing, particularly when using social media influencers (Mohr, 2013).

Influencer marketing is similar to eWOM in that it is used as a way to try and shape how an audience feels about a certain brand (Liu et al., 2015). It is used as an external form of marketing in which brands are relying on a third party to dictate what is said about the brand among consumers (Liu et al., 2015). However, eWOM is dictated by the consumers. It is solely what the audience is discussing about the brand. In order to control this, rather than reaching out to a third party, the brand develops internal marketing strategies (Liu et al., 2015). This could mean monitoring when a brand is mentioned online and intervening as soon as an issue arises from a negative social media post. This also occurs when a store manager asks a consumer to remove the negative review on their experience with the brand or product online. While both eWOM and influencer marketing are used to control the thoughts of consumers about a brand, it is important to note that one comes from internal marketing strategies and is dictated by the consumers, while one is using an external, third-party endorser that is most-often compensated (Liu et al., 2015). Despite the differences in these two strategies, both present concerns with trustworthiness. Social media influencers are compensated to speak favorably about a brand, and

brand managers are working behind the scenes to remove bad reviews for compensation or asking consumers to leave positive reviews -- all of which are putting the trustworthiness of the messages into question (Grafstrom et al., 2018). Despite these ethical issues that may arise, online word of mouth marketing and influencer marketing go hand in hand in enhancing a brand's reputation.

Online word of mouth marketing has particular benefits for both brands and consumers. These benefits include a customized marketing strategy for social networking sites, a powerful solution to modern marketing challenges, more reliable sources for information based on customer experience, overall reliability, a direct link to customers in a customer-centric market, and increased speed of the purchasing process because of increased comfort in the purchasing process (Subramanian, 2018). Despite the importance of the buying decision and the initial perception of a brand, customer satisfaction is also paramount to positive word of mouth (Subramanian, 2018). Within the model of word of mouth marketing, there are three main types of service expectations: desired service, adequate service and predicted service (Zeithaml et al., 1993). A brand that fulfills all three types of service expectations will have more success with generating positive word of mouth communication among customers online (Zeithaml et al., 1993).

With the mass adoption of social media, researchers have increasingly applied word of mouth marketing concepts to consumer behavior on social media platforms. That being said, elasticity in word of mouth marketing on social media is 20 times larger than other marketing events, and 30 times larger than marketing on other forms of media (Trusov et al., 2009). This means consumers are very sensitive to word of mouth marketing on social media compared to other types of marketing, as social media word of mouth marketing has the biggest influence on

the actions of consumers (Trusov et al., 2009). That being said, the messages spread on social media are utterly important to a brand's overall image.

To date, prior literature has focused more on how consumers approach word of mouth. There is little research on the clear opportunities marketing professionals in the fashion industry have in using social media as a word of mouth marketing tool. In the few studies that do discuss word of mouth communication from a brand's perspective, the methodology is quantitative, looking at a number of posts or content. My study will look at social media from a marketing professional's perspective that gives detailed qualitative information about how Instagram is used as a marketing tool in the fashion industry.

This study seeks to answer two specific research questions:

1. How are stores using social media marketing practices on Instagram to influence their consumers?
2. How do stores define success in audience engagement?

CHAPTER 4. METHODS

To address the study's research questions, this scholarly work needed a method that would allow for conversation with participants about personal experiences with Instagram. This study uses in-depth interviewing. In-depth interviewing has been used for a wide variety of qualitative research studies, including those focused upon marketing strategies (Granot et al., 2012). Coombes et al. (2009) suggested it is most often used for ethnography, life history, phenomenological research and grounded theory research. In-depth interviewing is an appropriate method, as its purpose is to collect information based on personal experience and storytelling (Lindlof and Taylor, 2011). Punch (2000) describes interviews as a useful way to understand reality by examining the meaning of a situation. Johnson (2002) suggests three primary meanings of the "deep understanding" (p. 106) sought in conducting in-depth interviews. The researcher first seeks to deeply understand the interview participant (Johnson, 2002). Then, the researcher hopes to go beyond surface level to find unheard information (Johnson, 2002). Finally, the research seeks to understand how personal experiences may skew the information that the researcher obtains from the participant (Johnson, 2002). Because of the limited previous research (Kim and Ko (2010, 2012); and Phan et. al (2011)) regarding social media marketing in stores or boutiques, gathering original data through in-depth interviewing fills this gap in research.

At the same time, in-depth interviewing comes with challenges. One of the biggest downfalls in conducting interviews are that they are labor intensive (Seidman, 2006). While each interview must be conducted individually, other methods -- particularly quantitative methods -- could be completed more quickly, such as sending surveys. Despite the detail interviews provide, limitations also exist. Warren (2002) believes that in-depth interviews possess limitations,

because too much of the data analysis of interview transcripts relies upon the interpretation of the researcher. In contrast, Hammersley and Gomm (2008) suggest the limitations to in-depth interviewing falls in the hands of the interviewee rather than the researcher. What is said by the research participant is based on how the initial question is interpreted, and the pressure the interviewee might feel to answer the questions (Hammersley and Gomm, 2008). The “pressure” Hammersley and Gomm (2008) mention is referring to the interviewee feeling as if they need to provide a certain answer to a question in order to fulfill the researcher’s expectation, which could cause inaccuracy in the information provided by the participant (Hammersley and Gomm, 2008). Looking at the bigger picture, Brown (2001) mentions another disadvantage relating to study size. With in-depth interviewing, this method often limits the research to only small-scale studies (Brown, 2001). In terms of phone interviewing in particular, Opendakker (2006) suggests one major disadvantage being the lack of social cues. When the researcher can’t see the body language and facial expressions of the interview subject, it can be difficult to accurately interpret exactly what the research subject meant (Opendakker, 2006).

Despite these limitations of in-depth interviewing, alternative methods -- such as surveying -- come with their own set of challenges. Fricker and Schonlau (2002) suggest some of the biggest limitations with surveying, the first being timeliness. Because there is no set schedule, the survey participants feel no obligation to participate in a timely fashion, if participating at all (Fricker and Schonlau 2002). The survey participant could inaccurately complete the survey or fill it out partially (Fricker and Schonlau, 2002). Lastly, while in-depth interviewing may be costly, conducting surveys for large-scale research is just as costly due to the cost of creating the survey, gaining contact information and distributing the survey (Fricker and Schonlau, 2002). While taking into consideration these advantages and disadvantages of

quantitative and qualitative methods, in-depth interviewing still provides insight to thoughts and feelings of participants that other methods would not sufficiently provide (Kvale 1996; Rubin and Rubin, 1995).

This study uses in-depth interviews to obtain information on how social media managers in the fashion industry employ word of mouth strategies to spread information. This study focuses upon these social media marketing practices on a local scale. This study defines **local stores** as those owned within the community itself. These brands are typically unfamiliar to a national audience and are unique to that particular location. Unlike luxury brands, these stores are local to their respective cities. Only one out of the 13 stores in this study has a duplicate store located in another city. While this store may be considered an “outlier” because of its multiple locations, the other locations are within the three states from which the researcher sampled. Therefore, all locations of this store are still representative of the Upper Midwest. That being said, this study focuses on local brands for a few of reasons, the first being there is limited academic research regarding Midwestern-based fashion brands. Other studies on social media influencers conducted nationally (Kim and Ko 2010, 2012; Phan et al., 2011) have tended to focus on similar brands within the luxury fashion industry. Additional scholarship (Godey et al., 2016, and Ko and Megehee 2012) have used information readily available online, such as luxury brand annual reports or stock market performance. This leaves a gap in research centering upon local fashion brands. This study hopes to fill this gap in research by focusing specifically on local stores and boutiques in the Upper Midwest (Missouri, Iowa and Minnesota).

This study features 13 interviews with social media managers of local fashion brands located in Des Moines, Iowa; Minneapolis; and Kansas City, Missouri. These three cities were chosen first based on similarities in population. According to the US Census Bureau, Kansas

City, Mo has a population of 459,787 people, Minneapolis has a population of 382,578 people, and Des Moines, Iowa has a population of 203,433 people (U.S. Census Bureau). While this study is being conducted in Ames, Iowa, the researcher initially chose Des Moines, Iowa as a starting point for this study, due to its geographic proximity. After obtaining a sample from Des Moines, Iowa, the researcher then expanded the study to encompass local stores from Minneapolis and Kansas City in order to gain a larger representation of the Upper Midwest. Based on location, population, and size relative to surrounding cities, these three cities provide an adequate representation of the Upper Midwest. The researcher also chose cities from three different states in order to protect their competitive practices across their region. It is important for the research subjects to understand that participating in this study has been classified by Iowa State's IRB as minimal risk. This study should not jeopardize their business performance, as their identities are not revealed in this thesis in relation to their competitors.

Before beginning interviews, the researcher sought approval from the IRB. Approval was granted on May 31, 2019. This study was ruled as "exempt" by the IRB, meaning the information provided by interview subjects does not pose any substantial risk to the participants. In the letter, it specifies that the study "only includes interactions involving educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures, or observation of public behavior (including visual or auditory recording) when the information obtained is recorded by the investigator in such a manner that the identity of the human subjects cannot readily be ascertained, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects." The study exemption documentation is available as Appendix A (p. 73).

To create the study's sample, the researcher started by searching the term "clothing boutiques" with the location being near: Des Moines, Iowa; Minneapolis, Minnesota; and Kansas

City, Missouri. Next, I took the top 15 results from this Yelp.com search that fit the following stipulations: Each of these fashion boutiques had to be primarily clothing-based -- offering a wide assortment of clothing rather than specialized items (such as a bridal shop or consignment/re-sale store); had to be privately owned and not a national chain, and must currently have an active Instagram account with at least 1,000 followers. Using these boutiques as possible starting points, the researcher used a snowball sampling method to identify additional participants. Biernacki and Waldord (1981) define snowball sampling as a “study sample through referrals made among people who share or know of others who possess some characteristics that are of research interest” (p. 141). Snowball sampling was employed in this study because finding interview subjects can be particularly difficult in remote locations (Biernacki and Waldord, 1981). Given the close proximity of stores and boutiques in their local cities, taking suggestions from one store owner of other stores that would fit the study made the most sense as they typically had close relationships with, or were familiar with other nearby stores and boutiques.

To identify study participants, the researcher contacted the owner of each store from my sample first by email. If the researcher did not obtain a response via email, then the researcher contacted the store directly by phone. The researcher did this to obtain permission to interview whoever is in charge of posting content onto Instagram, whether it was the owner or another employee. To find the owner’s email and phone number, the researcher went to each brand’s website and searched for a contact page or directory. If there was a directory, the researcher identified the email address and phone number of the store or owner. If there was no accessible contact information online, the researcher used the telephone number or email address listed on Yelp.com from each store. Otherwise, the researcher used the phone number or email given on

the “contact” button directly on the store’s Instagram account. Once the contact information was retrieved from the sampled brands, the researcher contacted each owner. In total, the researcher contacted 53 owners (17 in Des Moines, 19 in Kansas City and 17 in Minneapolis). Of the final interview sample of 13 interviewees, six interviews were located in Des Moines, five in Kansas City and two in Minneapolis.

The phone interviews were conducted between June 18-September 10, 2019. Prior to starting each interview, the researcher emailed a consent waiver to each participant that provided information regarding the study’s purposes and their participant rights. This allowed participants to “assess the risks of their participation” (Mishler, 1991: 121). The researcher audio recorded these interviews using the Google Voice application on my personal password-protected iPhone, in which only the researcher had access to. Prior to recording, the researcher received consent to audio-record the interview from each participant.

Once the interviews were concluded, the researcher saved the audio files to CyBox, which is a password-protected online storage system for Iowa State students. Only the researcher and the major professor had access to this system. The researcher also saved the files to my personal laptop, which is password and fingerprint protected. When saving these files, the researcher did not use the name of the participant or the brand. The researcher then transcribed each of these interviews. These files are also protected on CyBox and my personal computer. In this study’s findings, research participants are identified by loose characteristics -- such as brand location or by individual numbers/letters – to preserve anonymity (Morse, 1998). In this study, the interviews took an average of 39 minutes, and 27 seconds, with a standard deviation of 9 minutes and 54 seconds.

In planning the interview's content, the researcher used Legard et al.'s (2003) approach to interviewing as a guide, which outlines several stages for gaining trust and rapport with the interview subject. Initial questions were centered upon how long they've been in the industry, educational background and how long they've been working with social media, for example. The researcher then went through the main themes of the interview, asking about the brand specifically and how they use word of mouth marketing strategies on Instagram for their brand. The questions in this stage were specific, giving the interviewee specific points to discuss, rather than broad descriptions about the work they do. However, while these questions were specific, the researcher used an overall semi-structured interview protocol, available in Appendix B (p. 75). Longhurst (2003) defines a semi-structured interview as an interview in which the researcher has pre-written questions but allows for the conversation to be dictated by the subject. The dialogue is typically an ebb and flow dictated by the interview subject, in which the researcher then adjusts the questions as the conversation goes on (Longhurst, 2003).

Based on my research questions, the researcher wanted to get insight on the experiences of the interview subjects regarding social media practices. The researcher first began the interview with questions regarding background information such as educational experience, experience in the current industry, duration of social media use professionally, the subject's current job title and the subject's personal experience with using Instagram. After gaining more detail about the background information of the interview subject, the researcher asked questions specifically relating to my research questions. The topics first focused on the Instagram content and general practices in posting this content. The researcher then asked questions regarding audience demographics and engagement, and then finished by focusing on word of mouth marketing -- the theory behind this study. The researcher gained insight on what stores value

most about their Instagram content and what they deem successful. After having an in-depth conversation with the interview subject about these specific topics, the researcher finished the conversation with some closing topics regarding the challenges they face using Instagram now, and their expectations of Instagram marketing going forward.

To identify themes present in the interviews, the researcher used a grounded theory approach (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). The researcher looks carefully at the transcription of data and identifies key pieces of information and pulls them from the document, without following a specific codebook (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). After doing this process with each transcript, the researcher begins to compile common themes and key takeaways from each of these transcripts (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). Once the researcher started to develop these key takeaways, the researcher used Glaser and Strauss's (1967) "constant comparison method" (p. 101), in which the researcher compared and contrasted each key finding and began to form models from the main themes that reoccur during these comparisons.

After obtaining these main themes using compare and contrast, the researcher displayed these themes in chunks of texts expressing where the main theme was located. After pulling these chunks of texts from the various interview transcripts, the researcher compared and contrasted the text, removing whichever key takeaway might not fit (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). After conducting 13 interviews, the research attained saturation (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). Glaser and Strauss (1967) define saturation as the point when the researcher sees the same information over and over again during data collection and believes there are strong themes developed from the existing amount of research conducted.

CHAPTER 5. FINDINGS

This study examined how local stores and boutiques in the Upper Midwest use Instagram as a marketing tool. Specifically, this study looked at general social media practices, motivations to post, and evaluation of performance on Instagram among these 13 brands. To date, the previous literature has approached word of mouth from a consumer perspective, focusing on how consumers engage with brands and other consumers regarding a certain experience. There is limited research (to date) concerning the opportunities available to marketing professionals in the fashion industry by using social media for marketing purposes. This study filled this gap in research by gaining insight on how social media professionals are using Instagram to promote their brand. In using a qualitative methodology, this study takes a close, detailed look at the specific social media strategies from 13 different stores across the Upper Midwest.

While social media is a prominent part of every store's marketing strategy, almost all respondents mentioned they went through little to no actual training on social media use. Instead, the majority of respondents found trial and error to be the best way to learn how to use Instagram for marketing. One respondent used trial and error in discovering that posting content in the morning was the most successful, after going through a number of tests of posting content at different times on different days, and then reviewing the engagement levels. Another brand used this trial and error process in determining their most successful hashtags, mentioning that "we've chosen a group of hashtags over the last years and know which ones are giving us the most traction."

During these trial and error processes, the majority of respondents suggest working with at least one other person in creating and posting social media content. This is because of the heavy responsibility it takes in running an Instagram account. Owners suggest not having enough

time to run their Instagram on their own, so they give their employees access to the account so they can post content when the original respondent does not have time or is away from the store. Oftentimes they have split responsibilities, in which one person may be responsible for posting day-to-day content, while the other person takes care of events, promotions and other specialized content. This study looked further into the type of content these participants post, and how they go about posting this content.

Across the 13 brands, there are some reoccurring techniques on how they create and post content for marketing. The brands often maintain a visual identity by using the same professional photographer and by following a specific tone or theme on their Instagram feed. Aside from the content itself, these participants suggested other key ways to improve overall traffic to their Instagram page. The use of hashtags was discussed repeatedly during these interviews, as the majority of these respondents use hashtags with every Instagram post. One respondent found it imperative to represent the core values of the brand by including #sustainablefashion under all of the store's Instagram content. Other brands found it helpful to use more generalized hashtags such as #boutique or #DesMoines in increasing levels of engagement.

There were also external Instagram marketing factors discussed in these interviews, particularly the idea of using social media influencers. The respondents had contrasting opinions on whether or not social media influencers are worth the return on investment, mainly because brands felt influencers did not align well with their target audience. While the respondents use these social media strategies to increase engagement among their audience, none of these respondents suggested using social media to directly influence word of mouth. While only one of these respondents directly mentioned influencing what their audience is saying online, the rest of the respondents did not discuss this concept at all. The one respondent that did suggest

influencing what the audience is saying used a very specific social media strategy in achieving this. The respondent said:

As a customer if you tag us in a photo, you're entered into automatically win a \$50 gift card at the end of the month. So, you want people to organically talk about your store. You don't want to force [them to talk], nor do I want to pay people to do that. So, we want to reward the real people that are doing it.

Meanwhile, the rest of the respondents were focused more on increasing overall levels of engagement. Rather than attempting to impact what the audiences are saying about these 13 stores, they are more concerned with just getting the audiences to see their social media content, engage with it, visit the stores and make purchases. In doing this, these respondents sought inspiration from other brands to produce engaging content.

Aside from what these interview respondents were posting and how they were posting it, this research asked interviews how they evaluate Instagram content performance. This study concluded that while the majority of brands do not actively track electronic word of mouth online and typically do not receive negative feedback, through trial and error they have been able to identify what type of content typically performs the best. For these local, Upper Midwestern brands, posts that tell a story tend to bring the highest engagement. In telling a story, the respondents suggest that posts featuring people (particularly those recognizable to the brand like employees or owner), as well as those using humor tend to attract an audience. In discussing what performed well, these respondents also mentioned what they felt was the determining factor for defining a post as successful or not. They defined success in three different ways: 1) as a high number of likes and comments, 2) as an authentic representation of the brand or 3) as bringing a consumer to make a purchase from the post. This study now looks at each of these key takeaways in further detail, exploring similarities and differences in the respondents' experiences with using Instagram as a marketing tool.

Midwest Fashion Brands on Instagram

For this study, the researcher interviewed 13 participants from three cities representative of the Upper Midwest: Des Moines, Iowa; Kansas City, Missouri; and Minneapolis, Minnesota. These participants were a mix of both store owners, as well as employees that store owners referred through snowball sampling. These participants were typically employees in charge of marketing or promotions. There were very few employees in charge specifically of social media content, as they typically had other marketing responsibilities too. Six of these participants were store owners or employees in Des Moines, Iowa; another five participants were from Kansas City, Missouri; and the final two respondents were from Minneapolis, Minnesota. Of these participants, seven were male and six were female. These stores all maintained an active Instagram account with at least 1,000 followers, making them eligible to participate in this study based on the researcher's criteria for each participant. In terms of educational background, seven of the 13 subjects earned a bachelor's degree, one earned a master's degree, one earned an associate degree and two subjects earned a high school degree. In terms of experience, the average number of years the interview subject has been in the industry is 9.5 years, with a standard deviation of 7.4 years. Most of the interviewees are self-employed, with job titles such as: owner, founder, co-owner, social media manager or director of marketing. Table 1 provides further detail of these interview subjects' demographics.

Table 1. Study Participant Information

Store Type	Location	Gender	Educational Background	Years in the Industry
Outdoor wear	Des Moines, Iowa	Male	Did not specify	13
Women's clothing and homegoods	Des Moines, Iowa	Female	Bachelor's degree	2
Menswear and leather goods	Des Moines, Iowa	Male	High school degree	7
Design and clothing company	Des Moines, Iowa	Male	Bachelor's degree	6
Women's clothing	Minneapolis	Female	Bachelor's Degree	4
Women's Clothing	Minneapolis	Female	Master's degree	30
T-shirt and printed gift store	Kansas City, Mo	Male	Bachelor's degree	7
Women's clothing store	Des Moines, Iowa	Female	Associates degree	7-10
Women's clothing store	Des Moines, Iowa	Female	High school degree	6
Men's clothing store	Kansas City, Mo	Male	Bachelor's degree	14
Men's Clothing Store	Kansas City, Mo	Male	Bachelor's degree	11
Women's clothing store	Kansas City, Mo	Female	Did not specify	Did not specify
Men's Clothing Store	Kansas City, Mo	Male	Bachelor's degree	6

The research participants in this study represented a variety of Upper Midwestern brands and boutiques. Because this study was not limited to a specific type of store, there was a diverse selection in the type of clothing items being sold. There were outdoor stores, t-shirt and printing stores, custom leather stores, men's formal wear, both men's and women's lifestyle shops and vintage shops. Participants were asked to define their particular brand. One store owner, for example, defined his company as a "heritage outdoor store," where they sell gear for camping.

backpacking and other outdoor activities. However, he also considers the store to be a “lifestyle boutique” due to their large selection of casual clothing. Another interview subject similarly described the brand she works for as ever-expanding “high-end boutique.” Despite all of these brands being local in their relative cities, each store’s Instagram presence does not necessarily reflect the size of these stores overall. The Instagram following is inconsistent and does not seem to be correlated to any external factors such as type of store, location or product. As displayed in Table 2 below, the brands range from 1,216 to 46,000 followers on Instagram, averaging 8,515.15 followers.

Table 2. Size of Brand on Instagram

Store Location	Number of Instagram Followers	Number of Accounts the brand follows	Number of posts
Des Moines, Iowa	1,291	505	888
Des Moines, Iowa	1,549	280	1,230
Des Moines, Iowa	7,767	1,347	1,454
Des Moines, Iowa	46,800	1,767	1,811
Minneapolis	6,313	3,030	1,136
Minneapolis	3,688	5,303	290
Kansas City, Mo	10,000	217	1,561
Des Moines, Iowa	9,132	2,555	3,298
Des Moines, Iowa	2,285	1,204	375
Kansas City, Mo	4,193	309	646
Kansas City, Mo	4,763	3,223	4,808
Kansas City, Mo	1,216	827	557
Kansas City, Mo	11,700	9	1,263

Interview subjects often compared their use of Instagram to other social media platforms, particularly Facebook. Social audiences on Facebook tend to be older (generations beyond millennials), interviewees said. Six of the social media professionals interviewed in this study suggested that Instagram resonated more widely with their younger audience. To assist with this effort, some companies report relying upon younger staffers to run their Instagram presence. One

interviewee reported taking the advice of his younger employees on what content to post. Other social media professionals said they were more focused on broadening their reach, rather than segmenting the content based on age. One respondent, for instance, said that “80 to 90 percent of our focus as far as social media is on Instagram.” To reach both old and young audiences, the store typically links their content between Instagram and Facebook, so that their posts will reach the largest group of people possible.

Routines in Instagram Posting

Instagram, as described by one respondent, is considered as “the new wave of selling anything.” The interviewee said that they felt it was fully necessary to join Instagram for the sake of their profit. Overall, these brands join Instagram to try and gain some sort of competitive advantage over the other local stores in that particular city. One store suggested the following comparison, “I’d really rather have a hundred people see something that are intentionally shopping than a thousand that are just browsing the internet.” But this study identified a lack of prior learning in exactly how to use social media among these respondents. In learning how to use social media, the vast majority of respondents credit their current knowledge of social media use solely to trial and error. Simultaneously, the majority of respondents mentioned another employee often contributed to their social media presence. The respondents suggested working in teams of typically two people, or sometimes more. These team members typically split responsibilities, where one employee may handle day-to-day posts, while another follows a content calendar. A content calendar is a pre-planned calendar that schedules social media content in advance, which allows those posting to content to follow the calendar to post specific content at specific times. In posting this content, specific social media engagement strategies were discussed by interviewees to improve Instagram engagement.

Nine out of the 13 respondents mentioned having no previous professional training regarding using social media. Instead, they said they learned along the way. For the few that did have some other means of learning how to use social media, the knowledge oftentimes came from college. One respondent mentioned that their university degree provided background that “made me savvy with marketing for any businesses. It [the education] was pretty surface level about what marketing is, how it affects the business, and how you drive sales.” Other respondents had similar experiences, including coursework in photojournalism. A Des Moines store owner mentioned that, “We were basically learning how to run a photo studio. So that's my background and I would say I guess it does play into my marketing because I do all of my photos for my web site and my social media and marketing.” With limited training around social media, most interview subjects reported learning about Instagram on the job. One respondent said: “If something [Instagram marketing strategies] works, I latch on to it. If it doesn't then I usually drop it pretty quickly unless it's something that I think is cool or funny or really believe in, in which case I might give it a couple more shots.” One respondent mentioned using trial and error specifically for the timing of her posts. Another respondent mentioned using trial and error in posting certain photos. He mentioned, “I mean a lot of times, you know, if I take a photo that I think was really, really good and I posted it and it just kind of flops, that's because I have high hopes for it.”

While these social media practices were discovered via trial and error, it was oftentimes the responsibility of more than one employee to understand the best strategies in posting social media content. In seven of the stores, participants split up the responsibilities of planning content, creating content and pushing content out on Instagram. One store employee, for instance, mentioned the difficulty in making simple photos of clothing appear aesthetically

pleasing. She needed another employee's support to create this content. The interviewee said, "Not everybody is great at taking interesting photos of things. It's harder than you would think. Especially when you're limited to like the same space every day." While it isn't easy to post eye-catching content in the first place, it is also difficult to maintain consistent content, especially when the person posting the content varies. Another brand observed noticeable differences in the content depending on the employee posting. When the individual posts, "the brand very much carries my personality." In other cases, one employee might take care of simple day-to-day posts, while one produces long-term content. As the interviewee related:

I do all of the marketing content for our sales and our events, and our promotions and that kind of thing. You know some of those where a new product comes in, or some of those lifestyle shots. Some of that more spontaneous stuff. So, at this point, I'd say we split about 50/50 between the two of us.

In two other brands, all employees are granted access to their Instagram account. This team-based approach helped one owner when working remotely. "They can do kind of 'try on' stories on Instagram and show the new product if I'm not at the store," the interviewee said. While some paid great attention to the timing of their posts, others found it insignificant. Some employees have found success with higher levels of engagement early in the morning or later at night. One interviewee thinks these times are popular because "the first thing people do is get on their phones in the morning." Another store owner agreed that "I think my guys are sort of getting to work, opening up their emails, sort of like checking all their stuff in the morning and it seems to work well in the morning." In contrast, another interviewee said that if "people can see something when they're winding down for the evening after dinner, that's usually a good time to post." To better target their posts, some brands have used software and applications to schedule their Instagram content far in advance. Another store has experimented with several different timing techniques for posting on Instagram. They first tried posting Instagram content three to

four times a week (prior to the introduction of Instagram stories). They then attempted posting two to three times a day for five days a week, which they felt was “way too much.” This same respondent suggests how the story highlight feature could hold the opportunity to eliminate this stress:

We did three times a day two three times a day. It was crazy. Five days a week. But now with memories [story highlights], I think that changes a lot. If we truly wanted to, we could. If this was a huge selling tool for us, we could take pictures of all the new arrivals individually, put them on the story and have people respond to them or like claim items. I see a lot of other boutiques doing that and it seems to work really well for them.

Instagram Posting Strategies

Respondents also mentioned specific ways in which the stores and boutiques use social media to influence their consumers. When discussing the visual aspect of content, the respondents suggested that using professional photography enhances the visual aspect of a store’s Instagram feed. Visual consistency is also key with how the content is edited. Some of the respondents used the same filters or editing techniques in order to maintain a consistent tone or theme that is reflected throughout their entire feed. To increase traffic and engagement to the post, the majority of respondents mentioned using hashtags. Only half of the respondents have used or plan to use social media influencers to promote their products, however.

Because Instagram is an application focused around photos and overall visual appearance, photography is arguably the most important visual aspect of the content. Most of the stores and boutiques included in this study use some sort of professional photography to show their products on Instagram. One store owner found that products photographed professionally performed better on Instagram. She has a staff photographer shoot their content, and then formats it to fit their Instagram feed. “We rely on that [photography] to be compelling for whoever the audience ends up being and whoever sees it on Instagram.” An interviewee mentioned doing location-based shoots where they send the photographer to a specific location to shoot their

products from that certain area. Other store owners and employees agree that photography improves not only their Instagram performance, but also their overall brand image. One respondent mentioned the functionality of their Instagram account. The interviewee said, “They [consumers] can go see like a visual of what our brand looks like. So I think it's [Instagram] a great marketing tool.”

Aside from the photos themselves, the way these photos are edited or enhanced using certain filters or themes is also drastically important. One store, for instance, breaks up their feed based on weekly colors. Another store uses different color schemes for different seasons, allowing the Instagram page to complement their website. The respondent mentions the importance of the Instagram feed aligning well with the tone of their website, and how the website should also be coordinated to the certain season or holiday. Other brands -- rather than being color-focused -- follow a certain photo shape. One interviewee began putting borders around her photos for a clean, white Instagram page. Others use filters, which are essentially preset color settings that can be applied to a photo, so that it matches a particular theme or tone. A respondent explained, “I try to make everything be cohesive...And I'll change the tones in like what's going on fairly often because we're not one of those stores it's like only sells cream brown and white.” Another store owner mentioned the idea of remaining “real” when using filters. The interviewee explained that, “We actually rarely use filters because we want the products to sell itself and not be overly edited. So, we rarely use any filters, but we definitely try to have a consistent feel to the whole feed. “

Respondents also draw visual inspiration from other brands. One participant said she looks for pages that have very cohesive coloring that provides a good aesthetic, and she will use that as inspiration. She believes having this cohesive look can really spike the engagement for a

store or boutique. At the same time, it was also important for this respondent to assure that her content was not replicating that of other local stores. She felt it was important for her store to stand out and gain exposure from using Instagram differently than other local brands. For other brands, the opposite is also true. Some of the participants find it helpful to be supportive of other local brands and use their content as inspiration for their brand. One interviewee said he would look for other Midwestern brands that have a similar style or do something relating to their brand. One brand in this study presented as a slight outlier, as they use the news and what's trending verticals on Instagram for inspiration in producing their own Instagram content. They adapted trending topics, gearing their Instagram content to be relevant with what is currently happening in the world. In June, for instance, the store created items tailored to celebrating Gay Pride Month. This respondent mentions adjusting their Instagram content to fit this theme by basing product photos and captions around Gay Pride Month. The respondent said they like to keep up with what is trending around largely celebrated events as such. Aside from attracting an audience by having an aesthetically pleasing Instagram feed, it is also vital to interact with audience members on Instagram.

Engaging the Instagram Audience

While there may be multiple ways to interact with the audience on Instagram, these respondents described audience engagement as liking and commenting on their posts, reposting other people's posts, answering any questions or concerns via direct messaging and liking and responding to comments from consumers on the brand's posts. Through these actions, the brand attempts to control the overall brand reputation and consumer experience. In engaging well with the audience, these brands are overall trying to form and maintain positive relationships with their audience. One respondent, for instance, emphasizes the importance of interacting with your audience:

I try really hard to make sure that I get back to everybody. Whether it's a comment or a message or something. I am sure there there's some that have sort of slipped through the cracks. I'll be sure to if I'm doing like a sort of a wider shot of the shop, I'll make sure to tag as many of the brands that we carry that are visible in the photo. Those generally get a little bit more traction as well. But it is interesting to see just the more engaging that you are with your customers the more people see those posts. So anytime someone comments, I make sure to respond back. It almost seems that as more people comment, that will show up more on other people's feeds as well.

The practice of tagging other brands was mentioned by multiple respondents. In appealing to audiences, these stores and boutiques have a number of other brands they use as inspiration for curating Instagram content and generating overall engagement. Respondents use both local brands, as well as larger national and international brands for inspiration in producing Instagram content. One respondent said they try to follow what the brands they carry in-store are doing on their respective Instagram accounts. Another interviewee tags some of the major brands they carry each time he posts an item from that respective brand. On some occasions, these well-known brands will repost his original post. When this happens, the store owner feels reassured of his current Instagram strategies. The interviewee suggests the exposure is “high traffic because it's on their national brand website, so that is cool, too. It's always nice to know we're doing something right.” According to another interviewee, “tagging brands that are familiar will highlight aesthetic influences and brands we love.” This respondent also mentioned checking posts they are tagged in, and using these for engagement, too. The interviewee continued that, “We'll reach out to people who buy our brand and we'll comment and say they look great or they're killin' it.” Answering questions and being on top of responding to questions and comments as soon as possible is also essential. An interviewee said, “I mean you don't leave a customer hanging with a question. Sometimes people on a platform will ask you to hold things for them because they'll come pick it up, and I usually allow people to do that for twenty-four hours unless stated otherwise.”

Interviewees also used hashtags for greater engagement with their content on Instagram. Slightly more than two thirds of interview respondents mentioned using hashtags in their posts to increase visibility. One store, in particular, was very adamant about using hashtags. The owner said they have always used hashtags as an engagement tool. They use hashtags to mention the brands in the photo, as well as reposting posts made by their audience wearing an item they purchased. In contrast, most stores use hashtags to directly increase engagement and traffic to their Instagram page, which will hopefully convert into sales. Another boutique uses a different approach to hashtagging. Rather than using hashtags as staples to the brand, this social media professional views what is trending, and what hashtags are currently hot. She said that they try to pay attention to what is relevant. They search pages that feature the top trending hashtags, particularly for using a flat-lay or posting an outfit of the day photo. They then use these specific hashtags for these posts.

Aside from hashtags, using external sources to increase engagement has also become prominent in modern-day social media practices. Using social media influencers as sources to spread positive word of mouth and gain exposure for a brand is one strategy. Four stores in this study had generally positive thoughts about the use of social media influencers. Of these four stores, two have directly experience with using social media influencers for their brand, while the other two have not previously used them, but plan to use them in the future. One menswear store, for instance, has seen positive results from using social media influencers. A social media influencer passing through the Midwest on his way to Seattle stopped into this shop to check it out. The owners followed up on Instagram, noticing the influencer wears a lot of the same brands that the store carries, as well as follows a similar style. The influencer asked for a product in exchange for exposure to this influencer's audience. The store owner sent this influencer a

custom belt, which the social media influencer posted 10 or 15 times to his Instagram account. The owner suggests seeing great results with this, which led them to higher exposure. Another store has seen the positive results that other stores obtain from using social media influencers and hopes to begin using the practice soon. They already have adopted modeling on their Instagram, so social media influencers would help extend this activity. They just haven't committed to using any certain influencer yet.

Other stores, on the other hand, do have hesitations about using influencers, but believe it is beneficial in the end.

If you're an influencer with a good portfolio and you show their numbers of engagement and kind of follow through with things, I do partner with influencers. I believe that whole influencer industry has gotten a little crazy though. I have to be very careful I can't just give away clothes all the time. However, I do have a lot of influencers that approach me that want a partner and I would love to support other people. So that is my goal.

In contrast, nine of the other participants in this study are against using social media influencers. Some simply believe it isn't worth the money; others say that it doesn't align with their target audience. A store owner said, "I'm a little hesitant on the way that it gets monetized. I know it's good for likes/follows, but I'm not convinced that getting those people on board and coming up with some sort of compensation is actually worth the return of investment."

Because some of these social media influencers are being compensated, it is difficult for consumers to identify how credible these sources actually are. Still others mentioned that because they have an older demographic, using social media influencers would not be effective with an older crowd. For these reasons, some of the research participants suggested being particularly hesitant to using social media influencers. They believe compensating influencers removes the authenticity in their brand's overall image, especially on social media. Another interviewee noted, "When people are getting free stuff all the time, paying someone to document

them in it [the free products], that's not real life.” A couple of respondents suggest social media influencers seem “fake” and mention the whole process “getting out of hand.” Another common reason why these participants don’t use social media influencers is the fact that it does not align well with the audience of that particular store or boutique:

I've worked with some women that -- they're not like super high-profile influencers. Both of them live in L.A, and they reached out to me and they wanted to collaborate and wanted me to send them stuff. So, we did it and they sent photos [of them in the products] and like it was cool but at the end of the day, I just felt like there was a disconnect especially with our local customers. I've just kind of decided that it's a very fake industry.

While these stores and boutiques are actively using Instagram to increase audience engagement, there was only one direct mention of using Instagram to directly influence word of mouth. The main priority of these respondents was to increase awareness and engagement of their respective brands on Instagram. One respondent said, “We'll ask for giveaways or do contests or anything to really boost the engagement further pushing your post up in other people's feeds.” Another participant was also focused solely on engagement levels and did not mention word of mouth. This participant said they look at “how many people are looking at this post and just kind of seeing which ones get the most viewing or interaction.”

Discovering Successful Instagram Content

In terms of posting different types of content on Instagram, it can be particularly challenging to discover what the audience likes and what they don’t. One respondent, for instance, enjoys using humor in their brand posts, as he thinks “it's fine to be kind of dorky and stupid and I think people have been a lot more responsive to that kind of stuff.” Along with humor, telling a story or involving people the audience knows (or would like to get to know) tend to perform the best on Instagram, according to interviewees. In particular, people respond well to seeing store employees and owners acting as brand ambassadors to the shop. In one instance, a store owner described posting a flat-lay photo one day and receiving a very

disappointing amount of engagement. However, the next day, the same owner posted a photo of herself in an outfit mentioning the new products in store. That post received an unexpectedly high amount of engagement. Another participant also mentions her success with this use of storytelling. She said, “If you do posts that are solely for sales, those are harder to get traction on. Those [are] generic ads that our eyes tend to just gloss over. The stuff that is narrative and spontaneous feeling, where the product we’re highlighting is in some sort of context that the viewer can relate to, those tend to do better for us.”

Despite the high engagement that certain types of Instagram posts can receive, only one research participant mentioned using a software to track word of mouth online. The respondent said that:

It is a good tool for like social media agencies. I'm essentially my own agency. So what it does is it tracks the engagement, tracks impressions, tracks everything from you know these little clicks of course to you know your Facebook ad platform, these kind of impressions as well. But [the software] gives you a well-presented report that you can break down to your team or you know give you more data to make a better decision on how to move forward.

Despite the participant’s mention of tracking, he actually mentions this software to achieve other goals other than word of mouth – such as impressions and engagement.

In contrast, this idea of tracking word of mouth was foreign to many participants. Twelve out of the 13 Upper Midwestern stores and boutiques do not track how they are performing on Instagram. However, seven out of the 12 reported they do use either Google, Yelp, or Facebook as other online sources for checking customer reviews. One of these respondents gave specific reasoning for not tracking word of mouth. He said, “For the most part, we try not to think about that stuff too much cause like one bad review just really sucks, too. Like that's not fun to get.” While this respondent feels this type of feedback is discouraging, nearly all interview participants agreed that the occurrence of such negative feedback is actually very rare, especially

on Instagram. For the interviewees that did report receiving negative feedback on Facebook and Instagram, they suggested the feedback was typically religiously or politically charged, rather than relating to the store's actual products. By contrast, most participants said that they have only received positive feedback on Instagram because their followers actually want to see their content and wouldn't be following them if that wasn't the case. One respondent expresses this concept in further detail:

We don't have to deal with the negative comment aspect of Instagram. I think we probably just don't have a critical mass of followers. Most of our followers follow us. You know a lot of them are on a first name basis with the staff, so a lot of them are like friends to us. So the comments there tend to be almost 100% positive. Certainly we keep an eye on what kind of ratings we're getting on Google and Yelp and Facebook and that sort of thing but that's sort of a different conversation.

Interviewees assessed success on Instagram in several ways. One store owner defined success in terms of sales by getting her Instagram followers to see her posts and then go to her website to look more at her products. The interviewee said that:

I obviously want engagement. But when you see the result of posting a shirt or whatever and then that same day that shirt selling online, to me that's what the end game is like. Engagement is fun and all of that. But in order to do my job I have to sell the clothes. So when I see people actually convert [and] go to the website. That to me is the successful part.

Another owner specified that while it may be nice to get likes and comments, that is not always what's most important. The return on investment is what's important, and he appreciates the fact that Instagram is essentially free marketing. The owner said, "You know if I can make a post about a sale on Instagram that costs me nothing, and four people come in and spend \$500 to \$700 on the suit...that's been more than worthwhile." Meanwhile, this owner doesn't necessarily focus on selling one specific item. He would prefer that his store's Instagram audience is more aware of upcoming events to generate overall foot traffic. He mentioned:

Anytime time if we're throwing an event or throwing a party, if we can use Instagram to promote that and have a ton of people show up and come and grab a beer or whatever and play pool in the shop -- that just inherently turns to sales because people will come in and go grab a free beer and buy at least t-shirt on their way out.

Other store owners and employees found likes and comments to be the defining factor in determining success with Instagram content. These respondents did not use any certain software to track this “traffic.” Instead, they simply viewed which posts received the highest number of likes and comments. One social media marketer suggested comments to be the best sign of engagement because the audience takes the time to write a comment under the photo, rather than just hitting the like button and moving on. Another respondent suggested likes and comments are signs of excitement about the content. Still others assess success on Instagram by the representation of the brand.

The idea of telling the brand’s story emerged in numerous interviews, as the goal of many of these respondents was to remain authentic with the audience. Most of the respondents felt that authenticity holds higher value than anything else. One store owner said they like to give the audience some behind-the-scenes content that forms a more “emotional connection.” One retailer suggested finding this balance of remaining authentic while being “pretty” is difficult. She said being true to the brand and remaining organic is always better in the end. Another respondent said, “I want to be able to scroll through our feed and have it represent who we are as a business. The people we are, the products we carry, and is in line with our brand aesthetic.”

Despite the usefulness of Instagram for marketing, it comes with challenges that have been difficult for retailers to overcome. One of these challenges is the fluctuation in staff members at retail shops. Because these are typically not long-term job settings, it is difficult to have a stable “social media coordinator.” With the high turnover rate of their employees, one store owner noted that their “Instagram presence has sort of ebbed and flowed because we’ll

maybe have a staff member that we think would be good for the job and so we'll have them do it." Another challenge identified by respondents is the ability to stay relevant despite the volume of content on social media. This participant said, "I mean this is the competition; there's so much noise, right? What sets me aside from other people? How do we do things differently from not only a photo perspective but a partnership perspective?"

Looking ahead, almost all 13 research participants suggested it was difficult to say what exactly Instagram will look like and the role it will play on their respective store or boutique going forward. As for now, the biggest challenge moving forward is the ability to consistently produce new content, interviewees say. One practitioner said, "It is kind of hard to come up with sort of fresh new content because right now we're kind of you know we just hit the summer season so pretty much everything that we're going to have for the next couple months, we already have in the store. Another store owner agrees. "The biggest challenge is always content," the interviewee said. "Content is king. And our biggest challenge is really just producing a large amount of content so that we can put the right strategies behind it."

CHAPTER 6. DISCUSSION

This research looked at how fashion brands in the Upper Midwest used Instagram as a marketing tool for their stores and boutiques. Much like beauty magazines of the past, which created a market for fashion, beauty and lifestyle products (Keeble, 2005), Instagram enables today's consumers to get ideas about what is new and what is trending. In producing this content sought out by consumers, Instagram acts as an outlet that sets the trends and dictates what has become the newest thing on the market today. On a local scale, brands can use social media to dictate what is upcoming in their local market. In conducting these interviews about the social media platform, participants suggested numerous marketing strategies for influencing their consumers. This study also looked at the differences in how brands define what is successful on Instagram. This research carries significance for this industry, as there is still a lack of research regarding Instagram use in fashion, especially surrounding how consumers are using it as a platform for information seeking and inspiration. This study addresses a major gap in research in how fashion functions on Instagram from a brand's perspective. As a result, this thesis illustrates how Instagram is currently used for brand-to-brand inspiration, contributing to this area of current scholarship.

Prior research identified that Instagram reaches a much younger, more technologically savvy audience ranging from teenagers to those in their twenties (Salomon, 2013). This study aligns with this previous study, as almost all of the respondents mentioned their audience on Instagram to be much younger than that of other social media platforms, specifically Facebook. The current study suggests that these local brands post content for a younger audience on Instagram, because they understand how it works and can navigate to the store's profile quickly. In contrast, the respondents mention using Facebook to post their content that is meant for an

older audience. This study identifies a clear gap forming on social media platforms between the demographics of the target audiences.

Keeping in mind these differences in demographics among social platforms, the stores and boutiques profiled in this study each have unique ways in which they maintain a visual identity representative of their brand. Quataert's (2000) research aligns with this, discussing the brand/consumer relationship, and how a brand's aesthetic influences consumers. Professional photography, more specifically, was key toward achieving this vision. Understanding the importance of this visual identity is key in maintaining a successful business. Having a consistent aesthetic contributes to the credibility of that brand, and the ability to uphold a positive reputation. By maintaining an accurate and reliable this visual identity consistently, it will be easier for consumers to view content as being credible and will contribute to an overall positive brand reputation (Bruns, 2005). The same can be said with brand authenticity. As Schallen et al. (2014) discussed, brand authenticity is the combination of brand identity and brand image. The use of professional photography contributes to this idea of maintaining a consistent brand image (or visual identity). Therefore, using consistent professional content on Instagram combined with a consistent brand identity may lead consumers toward greater brand trust due to its authenticity (Burnett and Hutton, 2007). While using professional photography enhances their Instagram visual identity, these respondents also found using more specific visual strategies, such as following a certain style with the same filters or color scheme enhances image, too. Maintaining this visual consistency is important for consumers to have brand recognition, immediately associating the content with a certain brand.

Aside from visual identity, these participants also described specific ways in which they enhance their relationship with consumers. On Instagram, the respondents suggest

communicating via responding to direct messages, as well as liking and responding to comments from their audience on their posts. This aligns with Si (2015), who mentioned how social media is imperative to the consumer/brand relationship, as brands can post content they think best represents the brand. In turn, these brands can also gather useful information from their audience that could lead to increased profits. This consumer/brand interaction is important for how successful a brand is, as modern-day consumer purchasing power dictates the evolution of the fashion industry (Amed et al., 2018). Discovering what consumers are looking for can drastically improve a brand's marketing strategies, increasing a brand's competitiveness (Bhardwaj and Fairhurst, 2010). That being said, these respondents are focused less on being competitive regarding word of mouth, and more so regarding overall engagement.

Previous literature identified word of mouth marketing, particularly electronic word of mouth, to play a large role in how brands formulate strategies for posting content online (Libai et al., 2010). In this study, the participants may have been aware of the impact their social media marketing strategies have on word of mouth, but these respondents never explicitly mentioned efforts to influence what is said about their brand. This may be in large part due to the relatively small size of these stores. Because these are local brands that are already familiar to the audience in their respective community, some participants suggest that they don't need to worry about what they are doing to influence what is being said about the brand among their local audience members. Because these audience members are on a "first name basis" with employees, the stores focus more so on keeping these customers engaged and returning back to their Instagram content. Therefore, they did not need to change their social media marketing strategies to influence word of mouth. Instead, they focused on increasing engagement and obtaining "higher exposure" levels. That being said, there is a direct correlation between the lack of effort in

influencing word of mouth, and the lack of willingness to track it. However, in looking at Instagram in particular, most respondents said they rarely deal with negative feedback. These research participants stated that because their followers on Instagram are primarily friends, family or people they are familiar with, they do not leave negative feedback on Instagram content. They found Instagram to be useful for engagement, generating foot traffic into the store and making sales.

According to the interview subjects profiled in this study, respondents do not intensely track what their customers are saying about their brands online, or on Instagram in particular. Some say tracking word of mouth is unnecessary. Others think it is too complex and hard to understand even if they wanted to, while others suggest just checking out the comments or hashtags every now and then with ease due to the small-scale conversation occurring about their brand. The difference in these word of mouth practices could be for a couple different reasons. Because these stores and boutiques operate on a small scale (unlike previous literature, which focused on larger brands), they do not invest large amounts of money, personnel or resources into their Instagram activity. These 13 research participants also had no prior training in using Instagram professionally. Store owners and employees that run social media accounts for local brands in the Upper Midwest have essentially taught themselves their practices. While these respondents did suggest a variety of practices and strategies for using Instagram as a marketing tool, these practices were developed by trial and error. The participants suggest this being a fairly long process of guessing what their consumers would engage with, trying a certain idea, and then sticking with what is working going forward. Tracking conversation about the brand on Instagram would likely require expenses and knowledge that they do not currently have.

In this study, these local brands mention a few other reasons why they don't track what is being said online. The majority of respondents believe they already know what their audience is saying about their brand, because they have close relationships with their audiences and feel that they would not follow the brand on Instagram if they felt negatively about it. Some of the respondents describes isolated instances in which they received a bad review or a negative comment, but these examples were few and far between. The interviewees suggested negative feedback being so limited that it was hardly worth tracking the information. This research suggests that prior findings regarding using social media to influence word of mouth may not be applicable or may operate differently on a smaller scale (Silvermann, 2011). Larger luxury brands, for instance, likely have a large budget in which they can afford software that looks deeply into eWOM (State of Word of Mouth, 2014) collecting complex data that is only useful to those who understand it.

While some believe that the use of social media influencers may increase engagement, other respondents found using social media influencers to be particularly beneficial. For the majority who did not find using social media influencers to be useful, the main reasoning was that they did not align with their audience. Most respondents claimed that their audience was too old and using an influencer would be ineffective. Others suggested that these influencers were not a true, authentic representation of their brand. They felt that using social media influencers was disingenuous and could cause issues with discussing what is real and what isn't. It was suggested that a good deal of the time these respondents don't always find these individuals to be truthful in their shared reviews and opinions on products, services and brands. Freberg et al. (2011) suggest this is because the majority of these influencers are essentially "third-party endorsers" in which they leave a certain review about a brand, regardless of if it is authentic or

not. These influencers use their image and personal following as a way for brands to increase their reach and come in contact with completely new consumers (Ang, Khamis, and Welling, 2016). The goal is to attempt to control how the public perceives a store or brand, or an individual product (Freberg, Graham, McGaughey, and Freberg, 2011). While using social media influencers may be effective in larger luxury brands, the majority of local brands that participated in this study left it out of their Instagram marketing practices.

Local brands generally question the overall credibility of social media influencers. This is because the majority of social media influencers today receive some sort of payment (actual money, discounts on products or free products) for the content they post or for positive reviews (Carr and Hayes, 2014). Because of this, it is hard to say whether or not the information these influencers are sharing on social media is actually credible. Callison (2001) suggested the two biggest contributing factors to source credibility are trustworthiness and competence (O’Keefe, 1990; Callison, 2001). Because these influencers are compensated for their positive spread of word of mouth and because there is no guarantee in their level of expertise, these two factors seem inapplicable to using social media influencers among these local brands. While these respondents did not directly refer to this concept as source credibility, they did suggest feeling that social media influencers were fake or did not tell the truth about certain brands or products because they were getting paid by these same brands they were posting reviews for.

In discussing social media influencers, source credibility and other forms of social media practices, the respondents continuously raise one major theme throughout this study—authenticity. Respondents want their Instagram content to reflect the core values of the store or boutique. Despite what other brands might be doing, these respondents believe these local consumers value authenticity above all else and want to see a true representation of the brand.

Research participants continuously suggested that their local consumers engaged more with their content when it was a true representation of their brand. They believe their local audiences resonate more with fully authentic content, rather than content that is too fancy or doesn't represent the brand entirely. The respondents made this a high priority, as they believe it is of utmost importance when forming social media content.

This study helps extend prior definitions of brand authenticity (De Chernatony et al., 2011; Schallen et al., 2014). In conducting this study, the researcher found it necessary to contribute a new definition to brand authenticity that defines a brand's authenticity specifically on social media. In the context of Instagram, the researcher offers a new version of defining brand authenticity: social media brand authenticity is defined as the ability of companies to genuinely reflect their values and core beliefs in their posted social media content (photos, videos, stories, captions, etc.), regardless of outside influences. This new definition emphasizes how core values and beliefs shape authentic representation of a brand on social media. This differs from prior research that offer more generalized definitions of brand authenticity, in which social media use just one of the characteristics considered in the authenticity of a brand. This specialized definition contributes to the current literature regarding brand authenticity through the perspective of the local fashion industry.

CHAPTER 7. FUTURE RESEARCH AND CONCLUSION

Overall, this study advances the research regarding social media marketing strategies. Specifically, this research contributed key takeaways that separate this study from earlier ones. These key takeaways include: 1) Instagram marketing practices revolving around visual content and 2) audience engagement strategies. It also discussed the types of content the respondents found to be most successful and the ways in which the interviewees define success on Instagram. This study explored how word of mouth marketing theory plays a role in social media use in the local fashion industry. The research found that, among local brands, there is either a lack of awareness, a lack of care or a lack of necessity in using Instagram to influence word of mouth. Most importantly, this study identified the importance of brand authenticity when posting content on Instagram. This study addresses the current gap in research by offering a definition of brand authenticity for local fashion brands.

Limitations and Future Research

In conducting this study, the researcher faced some limitations. The first limitation is the sample size. This study also approached word of mouth marketing on Instagram from a narrow geographic perspective, focusing primarily on brands in the Upper Midwest. Their social media marketing strategies may drastically differ from larger brands. As a result, this information cannot be generalized to national-level brands. Another limitation in using in-depth interviewing surrounds the role of interview subjects. First, the data in this study is self-reported. Second, the data depends on how the initial question is interpreted and the pressure the interviewee might feel to answer the questions (Hammersley and Gomm, 2008). In this case, the interviewee may have a certain perception of how a question should be answered regarding social media use and may try to adjust their responses based on what will make them look the best in the eyes of the

interviewer (Hammersley and Gomm, 2008). In doing this, the interviewees could provide inaccurate results regarding them as employees, the values and goals of the brand, and how experienced they are in using social media (Hammersley and Gomm, 2008). The “pressure” that Hammersley and Gomm (2008) mention is referring to not only the external pressure to identify within the social norm of social media use, it is also the interviewee feeling as if they need to provide a certain answer to a question in order to fulfill the researcher’s expectation, both of which could cause inaccuracy in the information provided by the participant (Hammersley and Gomm, 2008). In terms of phone interviewing in particular, Opendaker (2006) suggests one major disadvantage is the lack of social cues. When the researcher can’t see the body language and facial expressions of the interview subject, it can be difficult to accurately interpret exactly what the research subject meant (Opendaker, 2006).

Despite these limitations, the findings in this research have usefulness for other researchers to conduct other studies based on what has been found. Particularly with a lack of previous research in relation to localized brands and social media marketing, this study leaves plenty of area for more research. Perhaps using a qualitative method with a larger sample size could allow for the Midwestern and or other localized regional brands to be viewed on a larger scale, looking further in depth into their marketing strategies. In this case, a researcher could use participants from all over the nation rather than solely in the Upper Midwest. This would expand this research to view localized social media marketing practices from a nation-wide perspective, rather than just a regional perspective. This could expand the overall view of social media marketing practices, attention to word of mouth and the emphasis in brand authenticity to see how they might differ based on location. Additionally, there is room to look further into social media influencers, and how they differ based on the size of the brand, the brand’s audience

demographics, and the core values of the brand. Particularly, future research could look at how store owners themselves may act as influencers in how they represent their brand. This could potentially be approached with a focus group or a content analysis, in which the research would be specified either from the perspective of the brand and/or influencer or from the perspective of consumers and how they see this content. This research could also be expanded by viewing the previous experience of national-level social media coordinators, and whether or not these same findings regarding trial and error are applicable to larger brands. Finally, there are opportunities for further research in brand authenticity. It would be interesting to discover whether these large-scale, national brands value authenticity online as much as these local brands do. This could be done using a survey, in which a large collection of quantitative data could be compared to show patterns in how national-level brands feel about brand authenticity. This would build upon this study as future research could apply the researcher's expanded "brand authenticity" definition to luxury brands to see if the same findings regarding brand authenticity hold true in these larger brands, as they consider core values and beliefs.

Looking forward, Instagram seems to be a topic in which academic research is just beginning. This study is just one addition to the limited previous research regarding Instagram's use as a marketing tool among local brands, particularly from a brand's perspective. This research contributes specifically to the Upper Midwest- a region often unaccounted for in prior research despite its active role in the fashion industry. Instagram is such a dominant part of today's media climate, particularly for social media marketing in the fashion industry. One could soon expect more research to come regarding the opportunities brands have in using Instagram as a social media marketing tool.

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APPENDIX A. IRB EXEMPTION FORM

IOWA STATE UNIVERSITY
OF SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY

Institutional Review Board
Office for Responsible Research
Vice President for Research
2420 Lincoln Way, Suite 202
Ames, Iowa 50014
515 294-4566

Date: 05/31/2019

To: Kasey Opfer Jan L Boyles

From: Office for Responsible Research

Title: Making a Fashion Statement: Word-of-Mouth Marketing on Instagram

IRB ID: 19-264

Submission Type: Initial Submission **Exemption Date:** 05/31/2019

The project referenced above has been declared exempt from most requirements of the human subject protections regulations as described in 45 CFR 46.104 or 21 CFR 56.104 because it meets the following federal requirements for exemption:

2018 - 2 (i): Research that only includes interactions involving educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures, or observation of public behavior (including visual or auditory recording) when the information obtained is recorded by the investigator in such a manner that the identity of the human subjects cannot readily be ascertained, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects.

The determination of exemption means that:

- ☐ **You do not need to submit an application for continuing review. Instead, you will receive a request for a brief status update every three years. The status update is intended to verify that the study is still ongoing.**
- ☐ **You must carry out the research as described in the IRB application.** Review by IRB staff is required prior to implementing modifications that may change the exempt status of the research. In general, review is required for any *modifications to the research procedures* (e.g., method of data collection, nature or scope of information to be collected, nature or duration of behavioral interventions, use of deception, etc.), any change in *privacy or confidentiality protections*, modifications that result in the *inclusion of participants from vulnerable populations*, removing plans for informing participants about the study, any *change that may increase the risk or discomfort to participants, and/or* any change such that the revised procedures do not fall into one or more of the [regulatory exemption categories](#). The purpose of review is to determine if the project still meets the federal criteria for exemption.
- ☐ All **changes to key personnel** must receive prior approval.
- ☐ **Promptly inform the IRB of any addition of or change in federal funding for this study.** Approval of the protocol referenced above applies only to funding sources that are specifically identified in the corresponding IRB application.

Detailed information about requirements for submitting modifications for exempt research can be found on our [website](#). For modifications that require prior approval, an amendment to the most recent IRB application must be submitted in IRBManager. A determination of exemption or approval from the IRB must be granted before implementing the proposed changes.

Non-exempt research is subject to many regulatory requirements that must be addressed prior to implementation of the study. Conducting non-exempt research without IRB review and approval may constitute non-compliance with federal regulations and/or academic misconduct according to ISU policy.

Additionally:

- ☐ All research involving human participants must be submitted for IRB review. **Only the IRB or its designees may make the determination of exemption**, even if you conduct a study in the future that is exactly like this study.
- ☐ **Please inform the IRB if the Principal Investigator and/or Supervising Investigator end their role or involvement with the project** with sufficient time to allow an alternate PI/Supervising Investigator to assume oversight responsibility. Projects must have an [eligible PI](#) to remain open.
- ☐ **Immediately inform the IRB of (1) all serious and/or unexpected [adverse experiences](#) involving risks to subjects or others; and (2) any other [unanticipated problems](#) involving risks to subjects or others.**
- ☐ **Approval from other entities may also be needed.** For example, access to data from private records (e.g., student, medical, or employment records, etc.) that are protected by FERPA, HIPAA or other confidentiality policies requires permission from the holders of those records. Similarly, for research conducted in institutions other than ISU (e.g., schools, other colleges or universities, medical facilities, companies, etc.), investigators must obtain permission from the institution(s) as required by their policies. **An IRB determination of exemption in no way implies or guarantees that permission from these other entities will be granted.**
- ☐ Your research study may be subject to [post-approval monitoring](#) by Iowa State University's Office for Responsible Research. In some cases, it may also be subject to formal audit or inspection by federal agencies and study sponsors.
- ☐ Upon completion of the project, transfer of IRB oversight to another IRB, or departure of the PI and/or Supervising Investigator, please initiate a Project Closure in IRBManager to officially close the project. For information on instances when a study may be closed, please refer to the [IRB Study Closure Policy](#).

Please don't hesitate to contact us if you have questions or concerns at 515-294-4566 or IRB@iastate.edu.

APPENDIX B. INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

Interview Subject	Date of Interview	Length of Interview
A	June 18, 2019	29 min 27 sec
B	June 19, 2019	37 min 23 sec
C	June 25, 2019	37 min 21 sec
D	June 26, 2019	28 min 32 sec
E	June 27, 2019	29 min 3 sec
F	June 27, 2019	37 min 6 sec
G	June 27, 2019	58 min 15 sec
H	July 8, 2019	56 min 43 sec
I	July 24, 2019	43 min 41 sec
J	August 13, 2019	39 min 55 sec
K	August 27, 2019	33 min 44 sec
L	September 9, 2019	32 min 12 sec
M	September 10, 2019	48 min 27 sec

APPENDIX C. INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Interview Questions:

Background Questions:

1. Can you give detail on your educational background?
 2. How did you get started in this industry?
 3. How many years have you been in the industry?
 4. What is your current title?
 5. How many years have you been in this position?
 6. What does your day-to-day look like for this job?
 7. How long have you been using social media in your job?
 8. Have you received any training in how to use social media for your job?
-
1. How would you define your brand?
 2. Are you the only one that works on social media content for your brand?
 3. Why did your brand decide to join Instagram?
 4. How would you describe the content that you post on Instagram?
 - Prompt interviewee, if needed, to describe a typical post.
 5. How would you describe your audience/follower base on Instagram?
 6. How do you build your follower base?
 7. What are some of the general practices you follow for posting content to reach an audience on Instagram?
 - Potential Follow Ups:
 - Tagging models and other brands?
 - Use of hashtags?
 - Use of the story feature?
 - Following a certain tone on the page? (filter, edits)
 - Posting on certain days/at certain times? (scheduled post?)
 - Outside apps to manage Instagram account?
 - Sponsored post?
 8. How did you develop these practices?
 9. How, if at all, have these practices changed over time?
 10. What inspires the content you post on Instagram?
 - Prompt interviewee, if needed, to name brands that inspire their engagement online
 - Prompt interviewee to name other brands they follow on Instagram; ask them what they are doing well in their engagement
 11. Do you work with local social media influencers? If so, in what ways?
 12. How do you interact with your audience on Instagram?
 13. How do you discover what works and what doesn't for engaging consumers in your Instagram content?
 14. How do you track what people are saying about your brand online?
 - Do you have any software that tracks this?

- Do you look for search for keywords or hashtags?
 - Do you look at what is trending?
 - Do you look at content you are tagged in?
15. Do you think your audience/customers are influenced by the content you post on Instagram? If so, in what ways?
16. How do you respond to positive feedback on Instagram, if at all?
- Prompt interviewee, if needed, to give an example of a recent post that had good engagement
17. How do you respond to negative criticism on Instagram, if at all?
- Prompt interviewee, if needed, to give an example of how they responded to negative feedback
18. What is the biggest challenge for your brand on Instagram?
19. How do you define success on Instagram?
20. How do you think your brand will be using Instagram five years from now?
21. Is there anything I haven't asked you about that I should know?